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ABSTRACT

Teachers should analyze the validity of those assumptions upon which schools operate. The premise that urban schools exist to teach children the three R's seems inaccurate in the face of evidence that many low income and minority group children are not reading at acceptable grade levels. The appropriateness of the medical diagnostic model in an educational setting seems suspect considering educators' lack of agreement in classifying behavior coupled with their tendency to project varying frames of reference upon the behavior they report. The deficit model of instruction for "disadvantaged" youth overlooks both teachers' errors in assessing the language production of children and the possibility that existing school environments might neither elicit the language production nor promote the language development of all children. Finally, though a visual perception deficit is often cited as a major cause of reading failure, some research indicates no difference between the success rate of retarded readers with perceptual deficits and those with none. (RD)

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"Reading and Urban Education: An Analysis of
Some Traditional and Emerging Premises"

Topic of Meeting: Reading and The Urban Child
Thursday, May 11, 1972
Time: 1:30-2:30

The major goal of this paper is to raise some probing questions this writer feels are important if we are to counteract some of the most recent trends in reading instruction in urban education. No conscious attempt will be made to sort out the "bad" guys from the "good" guys. If groupings and classifications of this type are made, they will be the reader's inferences rather than those of the writer.

As individuals involved in some way with the instructional scheme of schools we are by definition extensions of the basic assumptions and premises upon which the schools operate. Therefore, it behooves us to examine some of these operational premises and assumptions. Once examined, we may discover that there exists

a set of statements concerning the instructional program of the school that we do not agree with. This so-called "consciousness of discrepancies" is the seed of change itself.

Before we proceed any further it is necessary to arrive at an operational definition of the ^{word} premise. In this context, premise refers to a statement or a set of propositions from which certain conclusions are drawn. For example, in William Golding's Lord of the Flies it's rather obvious as one reads the novel what Golding's beliefs are regarding the nature of man. Imagine if you will, the type of school that would exist if some of the premises in this novel were articulated in an instructional environment. Yet, if we examine some of the constraining forces at work in our urban schools, we would find many areas of agreement with Golding about the nature of man(children). Just a glimpse at some of these constraining forces is necessary to draw some conclusions about the set of premises we have established about children in urban schools. What is the premise underlying compensatory education? The continual emergence of the Jensen argument(although articulated in many different ways)? The concept of deprivation? About the sets of readers we choose for our children?

This questioning attitude and analysis is urged by the writer.

Before this writer examines some of propositions surrounding reading instruction, a few words about the nature of the topic are necessary. First, when speaking about the "reading problem

of urban children" one must avoid the easy generalizations often derived from newspaper headlines. Our urban schools obviously have retarded readers, but they also have "good" readers. Furthermore, in an attempt to measure reading achievement one must keep in mind that the skills measured at the elementary levels are different from those being measured at the intermediate and secondary levels. Hence, reading competency can only be defined vis-a-vis the measuring instrument at a particular grade level.

Finally, when school systems publish the results of their standardized reading tests and show that all 6th graders are reading at 6.0 grade level, in actuality that 6.0 is an inflated score and has little relevancy for the instructional program of the children attending that school.

With these general considerations in mind and the further restriction that comparisons between systems employing different tests must be made with caution (6), this writer offers the following analysis of some basic premises around which urban schools are organized.

Premise I

Urban Schools exist to teach the children the three R's.

At first glance this statement appears quite accurate. However, upon a closer examination it becomes increasingly clear that urban schools don't exist to teach reading to a large segment of the population they serve. In Disadvantaged Children:

Health, Nutrition, and School Failure, Birch and Gussow (2), report on Davison's and Greenberg's study to locate an urban slum school where the children have made it. "Making it" was defined as being up to grade level in reading and mathematics. Davison and Greenberg surveyed the records of some 1,300 elementary school children to find 80 children who met the standard they had set. An incredible ratio of success to failure (1 in 16).

In the past few years these facts are not as difficult to come by. On the contrary, the schools readily admit their failure as they report their low reading scores to the public. The New York Times dated February 20, 1972, contained an article titled, "Scribner Asks for Improved Instruction in Reading." Commenting on the continuing decline in the reading scores of New York City children Chancellor Harvey B. Scribner declared, "...we have to accept the fact that the reading problem is very serious in New York City."

But as noted earlier by this writer, looking at a city in toto is at best misleading. For example, in the same article it was reported that while some schools reported reading scores two years above the norm, others reported scores two or more years below the norm. In essence, the 1971 test results showed that children going to schools in low-income areas (mostly Black and Puerto Rican), were once again not being taught to read well enough to achieve higher scores on these tests.

Writing in the Harvard Educational Review, Annie Stein (8), depicts this phenomenon as a bi-modal curve in reading achievement. "It peaks at two-and-a-half years below grade level, falls to nearly zero at grade level, and then rises to a peak again at two-and-a-half years above grade level." Generally speaking, the reading scores can be viewed as statements of the schools success with mainly middle and upper-income white children on the one hand, and statements of failure for mainly low-income Black and Puerto Rican children on the other hand.

Historically, children from low-income backgrounds have not been taught the three R's. For an educational system that advertises "learn more, earn more, stay in school," the economically disadvantaged child who naively comes to school to learn to read, quickly gets the message that (a) he does not learn more in school, (b) he not only leaves for various and sundry reasons, but is often pushed out, and (c) even if he does remain in school, the economic system is not as lucrative as the slogan suggests, especially if the child is Black or Puerto Rican.

The premise that schools in the urban milieu teach children to read can also be challenged when one looks at the nature of the school per se. The urban school is set up to serve the adult who earns his living there. The children are secondary to this purpose, in fact, too often lipservice is only paid to educating the children.

Lastly, when one plods through much of the literature on the teaching of reading in urban schools, one final premise seems questionable, i.e. reading skills as such need to be worked on in order to upgrade reading scores(5).*

Premise II

Diagnosis of behaviors in our urban schools is a precursor to worthwhile instruction.

Most of us here today have been exposed to what is considered an educationally sound principle in reading instruction. Although stated in various ways, depending on the particular discipline dealing with the topic, that principle in effect states that we must diagnose our children before any worthwhile program of instruction can begin. The more analytical a particular profile sheet appears on a test, the more we are apt to use that instrument. If that test isn't sufficient, we choose one with even a greater and more complex diagnostic profile. This endless search for the perfect instrument is, in this writer's opinion, "to dream the impossible dream".

We as educators have unfortunately emulated the medical model for diagnosing psycho-educational behaviors. An overview of that model and some of its shortcomings is presented here. Generally speaking the medical model deals with the following four areas: causation, classification, prognosis, and treatment(3).

A further analysis of these categories in the context of

*Dentler in "A Critique of Education Projects in Community Action Programs", poses this important question in his discussion of the Boston reading project. See, The Urban R's: Race Relations as the Problem in Urban Education, Robert Dentler, Bernard Mackler, and Mary Ellen Warshauer (eds.) New York, Praeger Publishers, 1967.

education will demonstrate that the kinds of questions we ask about children and the answers we seek are based on the premise that this model is appropriate for educators. For example, in medicine (the writer humbly apologizes to the AMA), the causes tend to be either singular or tangible, while in education, the causes of reading retardation for example, (if one can believe the experts) are multiple and less tangible. In medicine there exists relative agreement in terms of classifications, however, often within the same school the psychologist, the reading teacher, and the learning disability specialist can't agree as to how a "disability" should be classified if one exists.

Yet in this country not very long ago, large groups of people were sterilized because they were classified Mentally Retarded.

We also know that when children are diagnosed the dependent variable in terms of classification and treatment tends to be the person conducting the diagnosis. Stated somewhat differently, the educational training, background and biases of the examiner are more apt to be written into a report than something objective about the child. Pygmalion not only exists in the classroom, but also in the diagnostic setting.

In "Diagnosis Diagnosed", Wolfensberger (10), analyzes the "superstitious beliefs" surrounding the "sacred cow"(diagnosis) which has been enshrined in some type of mystique. The fact that this has become an estoreic topic can be ascertained when observing a specialist talking to a classroom teacher regarding "poor" Johnny. My own experience dictates that classroom teachers won't ask

specialists what a particular term means unless they feel comfortable with the person first. After all, who among us couldn't pass a vocabulary test on Learning Disability terminology.

The implications of these realities seriously suggest that classroom teachers as well as specialists in all disciplines be exposed to the historical context from which our current beliefs about testing and treatment of populations emerged.

In urban schools this examination of beliefs and myths is even more important. Some children who have not had prior experiences in testing situations, or are unaware of the strategies required to "survive" an individual diagnosis may be labelled, "anti-social", "hyperactive", "language deprived", or "does not relate well to the examiner".

Considerable time and space has been devoted to this topic because this writer feels that contrary to ^{The} hopes of some of our educational idealists, there will be a continual thrust in the area of testing in the next decade.

Lest we forget, no matter how much we refine qualitatively our psychometric devices, a major function of schools is still the sorting of children. (entire sentence in italics)

Premise III

Disadvantaged children who attend our urban schools suffer from social, mental, linguistic and perceptual deficits--these deficits have deleterious effects on their ability to learn.

The fact that this "deficit model" of behavior is readily accepted in our schools can easily be confirmed if one looks at the cumulative folders of children attending the urban schools. (Low reading scores are not synonymous with the "deficit model";

according to the schools these deficits are a causal factor of low reading ability).

When the responsibility for learning or not learning is placed on the child, as is the case with the "deficit behavioral model", the schools have a built-in rationalization for not teaching the children. An illustrative point is cited to support this "rationalization process" by school personnel. Writing in the Harvard Educational Review, Charles Valentine (9), reports on a conversation between a guidance counselor and a parent. The mother had asked the counselor why children in our neighborhood public school so often fail to learn. The counselor replied, "We find that children in our school who don't learn either are brain-damaged or don't have a father in their home...."

In the general area of reading instruction, disadvantaged children are often viewed and/or labelled "language deprived", "linguistically impaired", etc. These categories aside from yielding very little information about the child and how he or she might be taught, are also specious. A child who does not, or will not perform in some given language context(school), should not be judged as being unable to perform. He may be very competent linguistically, but because of other variables e.g. the affective environment that he is asked to perform in may lack support; he chooses to remain laconic.

There also exists some evidence which suggests that classroom teachers often make mistakes when talking about their children's language output. Roger Shuy (7), reports on the results of a

doctoral dissertation in which the researcher asked a group of urban teachers to identify the language problems of their students. After listening to a tape recording of their children and then characterizing the linguistic problems, Shuy reports that the researcher found a very low correlation of response to reality. (Eighty per cent of the teachers reported their children having a meager or limited vocabulary).

Once again the labels these teachers used to describe their children reflected deficit assumptions about behavior.

Classroom teachers and reading specialists often point to visual perceptual problems in urban disadvantaged children as the reason for poor reading ability. This assumes one important thing about the nature of visual perception. That is, if disadvantaged urban children who are achieving poorly in reading had improved visual perceptual functioning(as measured by a test of visual perception), they would show concomittant gains in reading achievement.

The research on visual perception and its relationship to reading improvement does not make this assumption as valid as some would like to believe. Commenting on "perceptual-motor activities in the treatment of severe reading disability", Balow(1), states:

Surprisingly, in numerous searches of the literature by this author...,no experimental study...of research design has been found that demonstrats special effectiveness for any of the physical, motor, or perceptual programs claimed to be useful in the prevention or correction of reading...

However, in all fairness to Balow, he recommends the inclusion of such programs to the primary grade curriculum.

In the Journal of Learning Disabilities, Cohen (4), interprets the visual perceptual deficit in terms of reading instruction. He reports that his clinic records "did not show any differences in the treatment success rate between retarded reading children with perceptual deficits and those without." What does seem likely to be effective is a well planned instructional program in certain reading skills.

It seems to this writer that beyond a minimal level, the ability to read is not a function of perceptual competency as is often stressed.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has attempted to analyze some widely held premises regarding the education of our urban children. By no stretch of the imagination have all of the "traditional wisdoms" which go into making decisions in our urban schools been discussed. Other areas of concern which should be scrutinized in urban education are:

- (a) the validity of current evaluation models
in judging the effectiveness of urban reading programs.
- (b) the validity of our assumptions regarding the sociological and linguistic homogeneity of urban ethnic groups.

Only when these assumptions and others are analyzed and questioned can our urban schools offer a pluralistic approach to teaching and evaluation. In reading instruction, for example,

The concept of pluralism would result in a substantial reduction in the number of children being labelled "retarded readers".

Finally, the role of the reading teacher in our urban institutions should be reconstructing the urban milieu (if it is devastating^{ating} to the child) and not remediating the child's behavior to fit this devastating^{ating} environment.

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